

# “TWO-PLY”: DISCORDANT NATURE AND ENGLISH LANDSCAPE IN ALICE OSWALD’S *DART*

John Parham  
University of Worcester

## ABSTRACT

This essay explores affinities between an English Studies approach to ecocriticism, posthumanism, and recent “ecopoetics.” It will be argued that Alice Oswald’s *Dart* (2002) demonstrates that a conjunction of lyric and narrative poetry, continuous with English literary tradition, can help unify deep ecological re-awakening with a more complex social and human ecology. Specifically, the essay will examine: the poem’s posthuman sense of our dual continuity with/discordance from nonhuman nature; integration of industrial activity into “nature”; acknowledgement of the integrity of humanity (encompassing an “environmental justice” perspective); and Oswald’s fundamental recognition, nevertheless, that ecological imperatives will always govern “human being.”

KEY WORDS: Alice Oswald, ecocriticism, English Studies, posthumanism, ecopoetics, narrative and lyric poetry, discordance.

## RESUMEN

Este ensayo explora las afinidades que existen entre una aproximación ecocrítica a los estudios ingleses, otra post-humanista y una tercera que hace uso de la reciente tendencia de la “ecopoética.” Se intentará demostrar que el poemario *Dart* (escrito en 2002 por Alice Oswald) que presenta una conjunción de poesía lírica y narrativa acorde con la tradición literaria inglesa, puede ayudar a unificar la concienciación profunda ecológica actual con una ecología humana y social más compleja. Específicamente, se examinarán los aspectos siguientes: el sentido post-humano de nuestra dualidad concordante/discrepanante con la naturaleza no-humana; la integración de la actividad industrial con la “naturaleza”; el reconocimiento de la integridad de la humanidad (que conlleva una perspectiva de “justicia medioambiental”); y la forma en que Oswald es implícitamente consciente de que los imperativos ecológicos gobernarán siempre a los “seres humanos”.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Alice Oswald, ecocrítica, estudios ingleses, post-humanismo, “ecopoética”, poesía lírica y narrativa, discordancia.



## INTRODUCTION: ECOLOGY AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

The science of ecology has shifted, Daniel Botkin writes, from a “strict concept of a highly structured, ordered and regulated, steady-state” (9) system to a recognition that the “harmony of nature”

is by its very essence discordant, created from the simultaneous movements of many tones, the combination of many processes flowing at the same time along various scales, leading not to a simple melody but to a symphony at some times harsh and at some times pleasing.(25)

Finding literary writing that might articulate this notion of contingent, discordant, or complex ecology requires, in the first instance, looking towards correspondingly complex literary traditions and modes of writing. In such traditions discordance invariably takes the shape of a relationship between the human and nonhuman marked, simultaneously, by conflict and cooperation.

Leo Marx, in this context, famously turned towards American literary tradition to explore the discordant, dissonant nature of humanity’s industrial impact upon the landscape in his classic book *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). He revealed, with particular effectiveness, the often mythical nature of American pastoral. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding Leo Marx’s influence, there is some justification in making a distinction between an American ecocriticism founded on a celebratory “North American wilderness writing,” and seen as offering “a poetic and contemplative elsewhere” (Barry 242), and a distinctive, “minatory” British ecocriticism. This, Peter Barry has argued, is especially mindful of the complex ecology that governs “nature” and human nature alike. It offers an emphasis where we are routinely “confronted with “natural” images in which questions of social theory [...] are inscribed in the scene or in the landscape” (242).

To offer some examples, in Wordsworth’s pastoral poem, “Michael,”<sup>1</sup> there is, we learn at the start, a close proximity of “the public way” to “the tumultuous brook of Green-head Ghyll” (1-2). Even where he describes the wild mountainous valley, an apparent “utter solitude” (13) with (apparently) “No habitation” (9), “a straggling heap of unhewn stones” (17) indicates the presence of the shepherd, Michael, working the land. Likewise, in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Lawrence has Clifford and Connie Chatterley in a wood which, while retaining “some of the mystery of wild, old England” (35), co-exists with industry, the visible chimneys of the local coalmine emitting “clouds of steam and smoke” (8). A more current example would be Ali Smith’s *The Accidental*, in which a dual carriageway—speedy transportation links servicing a global consumer capitalism—sits alongside a field of “wild flowers in the grass [...] long thin red ones, really pretty little blue ones” that in turn gives way to an out of town shopping centre (see 109-111). In English literature, then,

---

<sup>1</sup> Line references to the poem will appear in brackets in the main body of the text.

wild nature invariably co-exists with agricultural or industrial activity, or human settlement, migration or leisure patterns, each shaped, partially, by the dominant modes of production and social organisation.

This emphasis can be conceptualised via posthumanism. Posthumanism is a complex philosophy which, at the very least, divides into two divergent tendencies, the technological and the animal (see Westling 29). The first, then, emphasises the human's essentially technological nature and is encapsulated, as explored in work by Donna Haraway, Katherine N. Hayles and Neil Badmington, in the notion of the human as "cyborg," as a being characterised by an essential function of processing information, rather than by any biological embodiment, that is shared, as a characteristic, with machines (see Hayles 2-3). The second sense of posthumanism, emanating from animal studies, and epitomised in the work of Cary Wolfe, suggests a blurring of the human-animal, and human-nonhuman, binary. Though obviously divergent, both senses posit posthumanism as a relational concept which fundamentally questions and interrogates the essence of "humanness": a "common effect of its [posthumanism's] several definitions is to relativize the human by coupling it to some other order of being" (Clarke 2-3). In turn, this reshapes, especially from the animal studies perspective, our sense of the nonhuman and applies the perspectives of discordant ecology towards a substantial reconsideration of humanity's relationship to or place within (to use David Abram's phrase) "more-than-human" nature. It constitutes a decentring that occurs, Wolfe argues, in relation to "ecological [...] coordinates" (xvi).

Yet posthumanism does, nevertheless, postulate a delicate balance—of the continuity of the human from the nonhuman but also of the difference between, and integrity of, individual species. Wolfe argues, for example, that "the world is an ongoing, differentiated construction and creation of a shared environment, sometimes converging in a consensual domain, sometimes not" (xxiv). It is, then, a dialectical, dissonant paradigm rather than one that blithely assumes a harmonious, interrelationship of species. This suggests, in turn, that posthumanism might retain some elements of the originating term "humanism." Human being is, Wolfe argues, "open and closed"—"open on the level of structure to energy flows, environmental perturbations, and the like, but closed on the level of self-referential organisation" (xxiv-xxv). This implies, in the first place, a focus that might explore how human social organisation—e.g. agriculture, industry, technology—could work productively with the land and other species. Here, Tim Hayward has offered a conception of human nature whereby "rational" and "enlightened" self-interest can, nevertheless, be "harnessed to environmental ends" so long (one must remember) as those interests remain in accordance with ecological dictates (17). Consequently, posthumanism might also examine, given its relational basis, the corresponding impact, particularly where detrimental, of those activities on the human population itself, notably the less privileged social classes, an emphasis, of course, offered within environmental justice ecocriticism.

Catherine Brace and Adeline Johns-Putra have expanded the ecological concept of interconnection and ceaseless change to encompass continuous, ongoing, reciprocal dialogue between landscape, imagination and text (see 19-20). If one



way of conveying complex ecology is, then, via language, discourse, and cultural and literary works, this begs the question—which elements within English literature might be suitably placed to articulate a posthumanist perspective? One might well suggest the realist novel. Dominic Head has argued that the complexity of human-nonhuman relations suggests that “if ecocriticism is to realize its full potential, it will need to find a way of appropriating novelistic form” (65-66). This is because, perhaps, such complexity requires an unravelling and reordering that characterises narrative which, in turn, characterises the novelistic form (see Heise 762). In such a context, an archetypal English ecological writer might then be, as Richard Kerridge has suggested, Thomas Hardy:

the special value of Hardy to ecocritics is precisely in the way he does not separate place and person. He will not allow anything, place or person, to stabilise in meaning; its meaning is always a product of a shifting set of relations, and always seen in the act of generation by those relations. (141)

However, I will argue—through Alice Oswald’s 2002 poem *Dart*, perhaps the most prominent, recent example of nature poetry in the UK—that poetry too has the capacity to articulate the complexity of both posthuman and non-human nature, not least within a backdrop of environmental concern.

## ECOPOETRY/ECOPOETICS

The primary study of eco-poetics in the UK, Jonathan Bate’s *The Song of the Earth* (2000), formulates an essentially phenomenological eco-poetic in which the immediacy of the poetic image, as rendered in sound (rhyme, metre, assonance, onomatopoeia etc), has the capacity to recreate what might be called the “phenomenological moment.” Referring to the moment at which direct encounter with nature impacts upon human consciousness, its perceived importance is that poetic expression can circumvent layers of culturally mediated meaning, generating the capacity to inculcate a regard for other species and the phenomena of nature (see 154). On that basis, Bate resists any narrative, pragmatic, or directly educative function for poetry (266). Essentially deep ecological in conception, Bate’s poetic model is broadly parallel to, and indeed draws from, a tradition of lyric poetry which, as described by Jonathan Culler freights natural objects with an intense, “invested passion” as the poet “identifies his universe as a world of sentient forces” (138-139). We see this, for example, in lines that Bate quotes from Elizabeth Bishop’s “Brazil, January 1, 1502”—“Januaries, Nature greets our eyes/exactly as she must have greeted theirs” (64); or from John Clare’s “The Moorhen’s Nest”:

An old oak leaning o’er a badger’s den  
Whose cave-mouth enters ‘neath the twisted charms  
Of its old roots and keeps it safe from harms (161)

Ecologically problematic, in the risk that “by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire” such poems evoke not so much a love for phenomena as “an intense feeling for the act of addressing” that phenomena (Culler 139), what, more fundamentally, is missing from this model is transparent human agency, in the act of constructing the poem, its represented landscape, and, indeed, in the meaning generated. This has, however, been reinstated through debates that have recently taken place in journals such as *Ecopoetics*.

Here, such writers have begun with an understandable unease about the term “ecopoetry.” Jonathan Skinner, editor of *Ecopoetics*, writes:

I am suspicious of the term “ecopoetry”: either it’s redundant, replicating the “eco” already built into the ecology of words that, presumably, is poetry’s business, or it instrumentalizes (i.e. pigeonholes) poetry in a way that’s distasteful to any poet worth paying attention to. (127)

Marcella Durand shares Skinner’s secondary objection in particular, in a concern about “a poetry that too obviously delineates the battles between bulldozer and bird” (58). Yet she rejects the obvious alternative—a phenomenological poetic—in favour of a model premised upon the circular processes of relationship that exist between nature, imagination, text, and social discourse.

Durand draws on a concept from Baudelaire, *surnaturalism*, meaning “a state of perception which intensifies the existence of things, makes them hyperbolically themselves” (60). Yet she concludes that seeking “wished for/striven for” spaces is not as desirable as concentrating upon what’s actually there” because “wishing [...] entails a certain act of escape from and control over reality” (60). Instead, she regards an “intense observation of things” (60) and attention to actual “events, objects, matter, reality” as that which “animates and alters” poetry (62). In the context she is describing, this contemporary nature poetry, would embrace—*within* or *through* the work—ecological understanding. In turn, encapsulating ecological understanding within poetry would *reanimate* public language and modes of discourse because, Durand points out, poetic devices like metaphor have an ability to short-circuit scientific discourse or jargon in presenting and addressing ecological concerns:

For myself the process is as such: concentration upon spaces and landscape leads to poetry: poetry leads to further concentration upon spaces and landscape. It is my poetic ecological system—self-sustaining, linguistically self-contained, recycling, and, if successful, animating both word and perception with the idea of action. (60)

Skinner and Christopher Arigo have argued, in addition, that ecopoetics must encompass a human, “ethnological” dimension. “Ethnopoetics,” Arigo writes, is fundamental to “a complete ecopoetics, as humans are an integral part of the ecology” (qtd. Tarlo 9). Likewise, Skinner, in more detail, argues that “humans have been around a long time, and that [...] many so-called ‘wild’ landscapes are intensively anthropogenic” (129). Suggesting, also, that environmental destruction runs parallel to the oppression of “the subaltern, indigenous subject,” he indicates that ecopoetics should necessarily incorporate environmental injustice concerns



(129). Consequently, what has been envisaged, sometimes directly in response to Bate, is a more comprehensive social (and posthuman) ecopoetic, Harriet Tarlo, for example, advocating a breaking down of the distinction between the poetical and the political as part of a process of merging the physical world with the personal and subjective (see 21-22).

While writers on ecopoetics—see, for example, Durand (58) and Tarlo (14, 15-18)—have tended to advocate experimental forms, narrative poetry might also be well placed, in ways not inconsistent with ecocritical arguments about the novel, to unpick the complexity of posthuman being. Neil Roberts has disputed Bakhtin's somewhat polemical distinction between poetry as "the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet's individuality as reflected in his language and speech" (1) and a novelistic form generally organised around "socially oriented" (3) principles. Drawing, also, on Culler's contention that one can "distinguish two forces in poetry, the narrative and the apostrophic [or lyric]" (Culler 149), Roberts suggests that poetry since the II World War has in fact been characterised by an intermixture of narrative and lyric forms. While, interestingly, his examples include poets, such as Ted Hughes and Les Murray, highlighted by Bate, this conjunction offers a potentially fertile model for an alternative ecopoetics: one where phenomenological modes of writing, able to generate a deep ecological regard for other species, and to which lyric poetry seems well suited, might combine with a narrative mode that seeks to unravel the complex interrelationship of human with nonhuman. It is a model exemplified, I will now argue, by Alice Oswald's *Dart*.

## INTRODUCTION TO *DART*

Oswald's poem—structured around a narrative that follows the River Dart in Devon—opens with a question, formulating a puzzle that preoccupies the entirety of the work.

Who's this moving alive over the moor?

An old man seeking and finding a difficulty.<sup>2</sup>

While, in a sense, unconnected sentences, the question remaining unanswered, the "difficulty" can be seen as that of ecological complexity, and its ramifications for human being, which, as the editors of a recent collection of essays have noted, water epitomises. For water is, they write, "an autonomous, active force [that] affects human culture" but which "on the other hand, cultural ideologies and processes try to tame, to instrumentalize [...] albeit often with disastrous results" (Devine and Grewe-Volpp 4-5).

---

<sup>2</sup> All references to *Dart* will be from the edition that appears under "Works Cited." Subsequent page citations will appear in brackets in the main body of the text.

Raising such matters, Oswald is conscious of and sympathetic towards ecological imperatives. Yet she too is resistant to overly instrumental forms of representation, resulting in the poetic approach outlined in the brief introduction to her edited anthology *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*:

No prospects, pastorals or nostalgic poems are in here [...] The knack of enervating nature (which starts in literature and quickly spreads to everything we touch) is an obstacle to ecology which can only be countered by a kind of porousness or sorcery that brings living things unmediated into the text. (x)

Raking, like any outdoor work, is a more mobile, more many-sided way of knowing a place than looking. When you rake leaves for a couple of hours, you can hear right into the non-human world, it's as if you and the trees had found a meeting point in the sound of the rake. (ix)

If Oswald begins, therefore, by rejecting established poetic modes for representing nature, the rest of what she writes indicates a poetic model, developed in *Dart*, subtly responsive to ecological imperatives. The remainder of this article explores that model and will dwell in particular:

- on how a deep ecological sense of the integrity of nonhuman nature is conveyed by poetic devices that, as envisaged in phenomenological ecopoetics, brings “living things unmediated into the text”;
- how the complex task (the “sorcery”) of conveying the “porousness” of the physical and subjective and political worlds, results in a posthuman sense of our dual continuity with/discordance from other forms of nature. Here, much the same poetic devices are employed to integrate human, industrial activity within nature, an added environmental justice element foregrounding a sense of the integrity of humanity;
- lastly, I will look at how—with the analogy of raking positioning poetry as an intricate, lengthy, attentive process of attunement to nature—Oswald articulates a fundamental recognition, in the poem’s closing lines, that ecological imperatives will, nevertheless, *always* govern human existence; that is, that we live constantly, as she writes in *The Thunder Mutters*, with “the feeling of nature pulling a man back into the ground” (x).

## OSWALD’S PHENOMENOLOGY

A number of devices employed in *Dart*—use of the present tense, onomatopoeia, lack of punctuation—seem designed to awaken awareness of the immediacy, and magic, of the phenomenological moment. We share the delight of the “eel watcher,” for example, standing by a bridge, whose prosaic, but attentive observation gradually engenders a growing sense of beauty matched, in turn, by poetic flourish, the rhythm and rhyme allowing nature to “sing”:



two places I've seen eels, bright whips of flow  
like stopper waves the rivercurve slides through  
trampling around you at first you just make out  
the elver movement of the running sunlight (5-6) [...]

three foot under the road-judder you hold  
and breathe contracted to an eye-quiet world  
while an old dandelion unpicks her shawl  
and one by one the small spent oak flowers fall

Recreating, therefore, the “eel watcher’s” immersion in his environment—“I never pass that place and not make time/to see if there’s an eel come up the stream” (6)—the poem liberates a deep ecological sense of nature’s integrity and beauty. This is not, however, a simplistic or homogenised nature, but, rather, one characterised by three qualities: aggregation (of species); tension or conflict; and discordance.

Reviewing Tarlo’s recent anthology of “radical landscape poetry,” Robert Macfarlane notes a tendency in those poems towards “particularism,” a concentration, he writes, on “bits” of nature that “will not be allegorised into larger systems of radiance.” In her anthology, Oswald too describes a preference for work that “follow[s] the structure of oral poetry, which tends to be accretive rather than syntactic” and which employs “self-sufficient sentences that keep the poem open to the many centred energies of the natural world” (x). For in the poem, animals, phenomena, and occurrences—which appear, often, as “swift fragmentary happenings” (44)—are, indeed, distinct and self-contained:

tussocks, minute flies,  
wind, wings, roots (1)

Particularised, as such, nature is, accordingly, part characterised by conflict and the struggle for existence:

round streamlined creatures born into vanishing  
between golden hide-outs, trout at the mercy of rush  
quiver to keep still always

swimming up through the hiding  
freshwater shrimps driven flat in this struggle against  
haste pitching through stones (7)

In *Dart*, nature’s “symphony” is, then, in Botkin’s sense, invariably discordant:

[...] sweeping a plectrum along the  
stones  
and the stones’ hollows hooting back at them  
off-beat, as if luck should play the flute (17)

Consequently, as Oswald follows a course, consistent with the English landscape and its nature writing, towards the river’s human component, she reaches a



posthuman perspective in which humanity, too, exists in a discordant relationship with the surrounding environment.

## EQUIVALENCE WITH HUMAN BEING

Kym Martindale has written of *Dart's* "lyric democracy." Here, a "polyphony" of voices (Drangsholt 177) are all granted equal status, an equality that extends to encompass the human presence around the river notably in the interviews with local people that shape and articulate Oswald's perspective on nature. Demonstrating, David Wheatley writes, "that poetry need not choose between Hughesian deep myth and Larkinesque social realism," her intention is made clear in the preface:

The poem is made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart. Over the past two years I've been recording conversations with people who know the river. I've used these records as life-models from which to sketch out a series of characters—linking their voices into a sound-map of the river, a songline from the source to the sea [...] *All voices* should be read as the river's mutterings. [my italics]

Including, notably, the voices of working people, Oswald does two things: she encompasses human activity as integral to the river; and takes issues of environmental injustice as equivalent to similarly detrimental impacts upon nonhuman nature.

In *Dart* water underpins human activity which, in turn, shapes and re-shapes the river. The passage within which the terms of this sinuous interrelationship are established is where the river's two tributaries converge. Writing of "a mob of waters/ where East Dart smashes into West Dart" (10), the voice of the latter implores us to listen, to "put your ear to it" (10), an apparent invoking of "wild" nature against the "coppice and standards" of the East Dart (11). Yet, immediately prior to this, the West Dart had been seen washing away, and taunting, dead tin miners—"the West Dart pours through [...] singing/where's Ernie? Under the ground" (9-10). Ultimately, then, neither is awarded eminence (Martindale 313). Rather, it is through the co-existence of these "two wills gnarling and recoiling/and finally knuckling into balance" (10), that Oswald symbolises the dialectic of tension and mutual dependence that underpins natural relationships:

at loggerheads, lying next to one another on the  
riverbed  
wrangling away into this valley of oaks (11)

Oswald, in particular, weighs the balance between "the river as wild force of nature and biddable resource" (Wheatley). Inevitably, therefore, her description partly encompasses the environmental damage, or likely damage, that human activity inflicts on the river and its surrounding environment. Such activity is invariably characterised as detached from its surroundings, as unnatural, and artificial. In the first example of human work, we find a chambermaid "unlocking every morning with her peach-soap hands." The reference to peach—misplaced in this environ-



ment—extends to the chambermaid attempting to obliterate nature altogether from the hotel. Over an aside to “listen a lark going up in the dark,” her words are brusquely, efficiently, interposed: “Brush them away, squirt everything, bleach and vac and rubberglove them into a bin-bag” (4-5).

Such detachment is writ large in an environment, as subsequently described, of factories, mills, water and sewage works. Here, straightforward environmental condemnation gives way to more complex ecological critique, Oswald giving voice to how industrial and technological processes—processes which, in the Heideggerian sense, enframe nature, and turn it into a standing reserve—generate a prevailing condition of risk for nonhuman and human alike. While a dairy worker narrates

I'm in a rationalised set-up, a superplant. Everything's stainless  
and risk can be spun off by centrifugal motion (29)

as Ulrich Beck points out, risk, in the complex technology of late modernity, is generally unpredictable or invisible, incalculable and often irreversible (22-23). Oswald too, on such an understanding, undercuts such hubris, in two passages describing the respective activities of a water abstractor and sewage worker.

Claiming his to be “the real work of the river,” the double entendre of the water abstractor's job title becomes slowly apparent. Measuring and controlling a wild resource that is (seemingly) “gridded and channelled up” (25), he narrates with certainty, and even belligerence, until questioned midway through his speech by Jan Coo, the mythical “green man” whose spirit haunts the river. Suddenly, certainty diminishes, incrementally, into qualification and self-doubt:

have you any idea what goes into water?

*I have verified the calibration records [...]*

have you in so doing dealt with the black inert matter?

*in my own way. [...]*

have you created for us a feeling of relative  
invulnerability?

*I do my best. I walk under the rapid gravity filters, under the  
clarifier with the weight of all the water for the Torbay area  
going over me, it's a lot for one man to carry on his shoulders. (25-26, my italics)*

The hazardous nature of humanity's deployment of nature as resource is reinforced by a similar passage in which a sewage worker describes, rather too candidly, his own uncertainties and half measures when it comes to controlling and minimising risk. Of the likelihood of there being too much sewage to filter out, he says, defensively, “it's not my problem”; on the fact that they treat, therefore, only the primary flow, he simply responds—“Not much I can do” before admitting, disturbingly, that “the whole place is always on the point of going under” (30). Nature,



conversely, remains ever present, from the smallest of places—in the dairy works there is “a duck’s nest in the leat with four blue eggs” (29)—right through to its own omnipresence, seen when Oswald has the river pointedly ask the dairy worker: “have you forgotten the force that orders the world’s fields/and sets all cities in their sites [...]?” (29). Risk, rather than being “spun off,” perpetually ebbs away at the edges of humanity’s technological culture.

Nevertheless, Oswald’s views concerning the human impact upon the environment are not as polarised as this might indicate. Reflecting on her previous occupation, she has said:

I think about those years of gardening every single day. It was the foundation of a different way of perceiving things. Instead of looking at landscape in a baffled, long-ing way, it was a release when I worked outside to feel that I was using it, part of it. I became critical of any account that was not a working account. (Qtd. Kellaway)

Consequently, while censorious of industrialised modes of production that, blind to nature, imperil the wider ecosystem, work, even that involving the alteration or extraction of resources, is seen as a fundamental part of a dialogue that embeds humanity into “nature.” Here, two elements are foregrounded: the notion that human labour can actually encourage an attentiveness to the land and other species; and a humanist concern, encompassing questions of environmental injustice, about the impact of industrial practices and underlying political economy on the working population.

The first is most obviously apparent in a passage, immediately after the confluence of the two Darts, that describes an encounter between forester and water-nymph. The forester, working with a chainsaw, fells sections of the woods around the river. The nymph—seeing herself as “continuous of Salmacis,” vain and sensual, and who in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* seeks to seduce Hermaphroditus—torments the forester, attempting, over two pages, to seduce him too. She taunts him by implying that he is damaging the environment, that he is blind to nature:

woodman working on your own  
knocking the long shadows down (11)

Yet while she sings, we read in the plain, measured, dignified prose of the forester an attentiveness to the environment that yields an understanding of its ecology. “When the chainsaw cuts out,” he observes, “the place starts up again”; and in Spring, he can “feel the earth turning”; he notices, and knows the names of, local birds—Redstart and Pied Flycatchers; when nesting begins, he moves out, “Leaving the thickety places for the birds” (11). Correspondingly, his work is premised not only on a human, utilitarian need to conserve tree stock, but also an awareness of the positive impact that tree-felling can have on the environment. The forester fells “to give the forest some structure.” He leaves the newer oaks because the “tree”ll stand getting slowly thicker and taller, taking care of its surroundings” (12). Comparing his labour to the wind, which also fells trees, he notes “different creatures entering the gap [...] two roe deer wandering through this morning.” The forester is, in the end,



protected from the waternymph's attempted seduction through, as Kym Martindale points out, absorption in his work (320), retaining his humanness while attuned, at the same time, both to the beauty of nature and ecological interrelationship. While the nymph persists in her taunting of him—"notice this, next time you pause"—he has, all along, been noticing:

such deep woods it feels like indoors and then you look down  
and see it's raining on the river (11)

Neither is such a perspective confined to those working on the land. For it encompasses more industrial forms of activity, seen notably in the detailed, sympathetic narrative of a wool mill worker (18-20). This begins unpromisingly. He applies detergent to sheep wool covered in blue paint and shit which is, he evasively explains, "reasonably biodegradable" (18). The industrial process is narrated rhythmically as a relentless, disconnected process:

tufting felting hanks tops spindles slubbings  
hoppers and rollers and slatted belts (19)

Yet Oswald also foregrounds the skill and intelligence—in the combination of technical knowhow and acquaintance with nature—that comes with the job: "I can stand by the fleece pile and pick out the different breeds" (19). In a side note, she records that "the Woollen Mill has a license to extract river water for washing the wool and for making up the dyes" (19). Yet, rather than incite a mentality of blind exploitation of the river, the worker acknowledges that

we depend on it for its soft water  
because it runs over granite and it's relatively free of  
calcium (19)

Hence, while he naturalises his activity—"I see us like cormorants, living off the river" (19)—in speaking also of the difficulties caused by peat in the river-water, the impression given is of the fragility of human industry in the face of the ever-changing nature of the river. The human-nonhuman relationship is seen as being as delicately intertwined as the wool that he produces: "we end up with two-ply, a balanced twist, like the river" (20). The parallel, intertwined relationship within which the wool worker operates, political economy, is similarly dialectical. Caught in a globalised economic system, the red wool produced for carpets being for Japanese weddings, this is, nevertheless, mitigated by the satisfaction of what is "skilled work" and of still being able to produce "pure wool, one of the last places" (20).

Both interrelationships are of course also potentially problematic and it is symptomatic of the humanism which, even in a literal and traditional sense, underlies Oswald's posthumanism, that our own species' vulnerability figures prominently in the poem. Sympathy towards a "natural" human drowning, marked in the silence of half a page of white space (22), is paralleled by a sympathy engendered by the perils facing those working the Dart and its surrounding environment. Hence, names



of the dead tin miners, also drowned, are memorialised on page 10. Likewise, the rhythmic description (quoted above) of the machinery of wool making is interrupted, abruptly, when Oswald notes the attendant health risks:

[...] wool puffs flying through tubes distributed by  
cyclones

wool in the back of the throat [...] (19)

That sympathy is coloured, furthermore, by class connotations.

Oswald is sensitive to the class hierarchies around the river. The autocratic bailiff, “with letters after my name, in boots, in a company vehicle, patrolling [...] with all my qualified faculties on these fish” (8), keeps an eye, in particular, on the town boys who, themselves speaking in parentheses, and therefore embodied poetically as marginal voices, are evidently working-class: “I hide in the bushes with my diploma and along comes the Tavistock boys, they’ve only got to wet their arms and grab, it’s like shoplifting” (9). Yet the reader’s sympathy is provoked when, in a detailed narrative, it becomes clear that poaching is both motivated by poverty and intrinsically hazardous:

[...] The skill’s to time it right, to row out  
fast and shoot your net fast over the stern,  
a risky operation when you’re leaning out and the boat  
wobbles—

I saw a man fallover the edge once (38-39)

A social notch further up, the sympathy extends to those compelled to earn a living in occupations that are similarly perilous, to health and with regard to economic vulnerability. We see this in a passage narrated by crabbers, two brothers who’d left school at fifteen to work the large boats out of Dartmouth. This was hard, heavy work which could, however, when “it was like crabs were a free commodity,” earn them a thousand pounds a week. Yet after ten years “you pay for it with your body. Arthritis in the thumbs, elbows, knees, shoulders, back” (47). We find the crabbers reduced to fishing with a line “off small piss-pot boats and setting nets for whatever”; or, sometimes starving: “Me and my dog went six days without food last winter” (47). For others, economic vulnerability is partly due to global and unsustainable fishing practices: once there had been “so many salmon you could sit up to your knees in dead fish keeping your legs warm” (37); now, they are scarce because “They get caught off/Greenland in the monofilaments” (41). And while, as a consequence, there is “cut-throat” competition between legitimate fishermen and poachers, Oswald minimises that distinction—reporting of the former, “more than likely he’s got a legal right hand and a rogue left hand.” The social judgement becomes superfluous, Oswald constructing in its place, a narrative of pervasive environmental injustice, one in which she “interweave[s],” John Lucas has written, “a human history of effort, skill, achievement” with one “increasingly, of loss.”



## THE NARRATIVE OF THE DART AND POSTHUMAN BEING

Nature, as depicted in *Dart*, is complex and baffling. The river emerges, on the opening page, in obscurity—“lying low in darkness” and, by page six, remains evasive, moving in “privacy under my stone tent.” This is symptomatic of an “eye-quiet,” inaudible world (6), resistant to human perception. Of the sounds of the river, Oswald asks

can you hear them at all,  
muted and plucked,  
muttering something that can only be expressed as  
hitting a series of small bells just under the level of your  
listening? (17-18)

Yet, to the attentive observer, or listener, the natural world of *Dart* is readable; literally so. Generations of salmon, Oswald writes, are “inscribed into this river” (9); there’s “a Fly’s Foot typing on water” (18); the Dart itself “traces a red leaf flood mark” (17). The eel watcher, then, spellbound by a series of accretive observations, nevertheless identifies a pattern, where the river

[...] endlessly in motion as each wave  
photos its flowing on the bridge’s curve

And so eventually, over and above the aggregation of species, the poem reveals an overall conception of nature.

Janne Stigen Drangsholt writes that movement in *Dart* “is absolutely present yet firmly dis-placed in its lack of linear purpose” (170). And that is precisely the point. While what constitutes nature is motion, polyphony, and discordance—endless complexity—this is a paradigm, nevertheless. To underwrite what is, essentially, an ecological perspective, Oswald enlists the water scientist Theodor Schwenk who, in his book *Sensitive Chaos*, sought to reinstate, against a prevailing emphasis on water’s “value” and “utility,” a sense of its intrinsic “being” (9-10). Oswald incorporates his words as follows:

‘whenever currents of water meet the confluence is  
always the place  
where rhythmical and spiralling movements may arise,  
spiralling surfaces which glide past one another in  
manifold winding and curving forms  
new water keeps flowing through each single strand of  
of water  
whole surfaces interweaving spatially and flowing past  
each other [...] (20)

Schwenk saw water not only as representing the central principle of movement or liquidity in nature but, moreover, as the actual “bearer of the living formative processes” from which “a vital coherence among living things” arises (9-10). Water,



he continued, “will always attempt to form an organic whole by joining what is divided and uniting it in [...] a circulatory system; everything is inwardly connected and reciprocally related” (13). And so, Oswald too, while presenting a narrative of nature as a “repeated note/of disorder and rhythm in collision” (7), nevertheless specifies that, within this discordance, phenomena interweave with and flow through each other; the relationship is, in other words, characterised, as well, by co-existence and cooperation, a truly two-ply relationship which, as the woolworker indicates, encompasses the human.

On this basis, critics have connected *Dart* to theories concerning the destabilisation of identity. Drawing comparison with Queer Theory’s questioning of unified subjectivity, Martindale notes that “The river, whose presence is, apparently, the unifying principle of the poem, is several bodies of water” (310); Drangsholt, likewise, that the river issues a “challenge to the idea of self [...] in the sense that it constructs, and unceasingly alters, its being in encounters with the other” (177). Such readings suggest that *Dart* might help answer Tarlo’s justifiable criticism that notions of the destabilisation of the subject remain “a very human obsession” and her call for an ecopoetics where destabilisation is taken “outside human concerns” towards a blurring of “the inner self/outer world distinction” (17). Without disputing that, I would invoke, nevertheless, a slightly different articulation of identity, Anthony Giddens’ view that self-identity, though reflexive and contingent, generally coheres around a “narrative of the self,” constructed from the circumstances of one’s own biography (74-76). Because, in fact, the human inhabitants of *Dart*—invariably identified in Oswald’s marginal notes through an occupation or activity—do forge largely coherent identities which are, furthermore, constructed around their material relation to the river. In doing so, they intuit, the ecological basis of human nature, even while remaining, for the most part, aware of the contingent, provisional, forever shifting ground that characterises that relationship (and, therefore, their own self-identities). The chambermaid may be oblivious, or the water abstractor flippant, but the forester, from his occupation, comes to understand ecological nature more or less scientifically; conversely, the crabber apprehends the beauty of nature, and the essentialness of it for human fulfilment, in a fundamentally deep ecological sense:

But tell me another job where you can see the whole sunrise every morning. No clocking in, no time bell. In summer you can dive in, see whales jumping, catch turtles the size of a dory. You slap your hands on a boatside and tell me another job where a dolphin spooks you, looks you straight in the eye and lets you touch him. You don’t know what you are till you’ve seen that (47)

## CONCLUSION

Jhan Hochmann (qtd. Coupe 3) has distinguished “nature,” an aggregation of separate species and phenomena, from “Nature” which—as defined by Raymond Williams—constitutes an “inherent force that directs either the world or human beings or both” (see Williams 219). While forester and crabber testify to the essential



necessity of both a pragmatic and spiritual interrelationship between human and nonhuman “nature,” Oswald nevertheless indicates that “Nature”—Schwenk’s “vital coherence,” or what she calls the world’s “huge vascular structure” (42)—will always, ultimately, overwhelm human being.

This, in fact, is signalled from the outset. The “old man seeking and finding a difficulty” is a “walker” who, narrating in what Linda Russo has described as a “pronoun-heavy, possessive and humancentric” style that typifies Romantic verse (Cited Tarlo 6), declares to the river “I keep you folded in my mack pocket” (1), before itemising his achievements: “I’ve done all the walks, the Two/Moors Way, the Tors, this long winding line the Dart” (1). Yet the river soon puts him in his place. The strength of its voice—notably in the words “I/won’t let go of man” (1), underscored by the *enjambment* (Martindale 314)—highlights a higher power which quickly overwhelms the human narrative voice rendered, thereafter, in the third person. The river’s voice interrupts, questions, and contradicts the walker’s increasingly fragile assurance, and exposes his pomposity interjecting, at one point, “listen to the horrible keep-time of a man walking” (1-2). Before long, the walker can only concede his lack of understanding: “I don’t know, all I know is walking” (2).

This intimation of Nature’s overriding power simmers along in the repeated metaphor of “muttering.” Signifying, of course, the indistinct way in which meaning is written into nature, its “difficulty” for humanity to grasp, “muttering” also indicates an aggrieved, grumbling, slightly threatening tone prompted, in this context, by humanity’s detrimental environmental impact, as apparent from Oswald’s use of the word in titling her environmentalist anthology. Of a “jostling procession of waters,” she asks, for example,

why is it so sedulously clattering  
so like a man mechanically muttering  
so sighing [...] (42)

This overriding sense—of “Nature” as elusive, portentous and dangerous—is underwritten, however, as the river proceeds to the estuary at Dartmouth, and the poem, correspondingly, to its close.

Returning to the question that opens *Dart*, in a passage that describes seals “swaddled” in a cave, Oswald ends with the seal’s “dog-soft eyes,” (still) asking:

who’s this moving in the dark?

to which a voice answers

[...] Me  
This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy,

all names, all voices, Slip-Shape, this is Proteus,  
whoever that is, the shepherd of the seals,  
driving my many selves from cave to cave...

Having called a subsequent collection *Woods etc.*, Oswald has said “I love etc and dot dot dot. I feel the universe is constructed with an etc” (Kellaway). Closing, itself, with an ellipsis, *Dart*, too, leaves us with the truth or meaning of “Nature” unresolved. Except, that where the river (“nature”) has been, throughout, the dominant voice—interrupting, questioning, overriding competing, human voices—here, “Nature,” in the even more perilous shape of the sea, “drives” home, in such a well chosen verb, its own overwhelming power to contain and control everything, “all names, all voices,” even the human. For the sea is the “Self-maker, speaking its meaning over mine” says the sealwatcher, on a jet-ski, who narrates this passage. He writes his name on the sand only to find it obliterated.

This is, nevertheless, the same Nature which, in the persona of the sea, “suckles and settles” the seals just as, earlier in the poem, the river had perpetually taken but also given life back. This is symbolised by the watery nymph who, reconciled to the forester, prays for a renewal that would encompass humans too

come spring that  
lights one oak  
off the next

and the fields  
and workers bursting  
into light amen (14) (See Drangsholt 177)

Nature, then, is forever poised between destruction and renewal. It “presents itself, continually,” John Ruskin wrote, as a “warning” but also a “choice, the good and the evil set on the right hand and the left” (416). An understanding developed in *Dart* from the mutual imbrication that characterises a landscape, like much of the UK, peppered with agricultural and industrial activity, this is the fundamental ecological reality of human being, brought to its senses in Oswald’s poem.

## WORKS CITED

- BADMINGTON, Neil, ed. *Posthumanism*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000.
- BARRY, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2008.
- BATE, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. London: Picador, 2000.
- BECK, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage, 1992.
- BOTKIN, Daniel B. *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990.
- BRACE, Catherine, and Adeline JOHNS-PUTRA, eds. *Process: Landscape and Text*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010.
- CLARKE, Bruce. *Posthuman Metamorphosis: Narrative and Systems*. New York: Fordham UP, 2008.



- COUPE, Laurence, ed. *The Green Studies Reader: from Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- CULLER, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- DEVINE, Maureen, and Christa GREWE-VOLPP, eds. *Words on Water: Literary and Cultural Representations*. Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008.
- DRANGSHOLT, Janne Stigen. "Sounding the Landscape: Dis-placement in the Poetry of Alice Oswald." *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry*. Ed. Anne Karhio, Seán Crosson, and Charles I. Armstrong. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 167-179.
- DURAND, Marcella. "The Ecology of Poetry." *ecopoetics* 2 (2002): 58-62.
- GIDDENS, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.
- HARAWAY, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association, 1991.
- HAYLES, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999.
- HAYWARD, Tim. *Political Theory and Ecological Values*. Cambridge: Polity, 1998.
- HEAD, Dominic. "Problems in Ecocriticism and the Novel." *Key Words* 1 (1998): 60-73.
- HEISE, Ursula. "Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems: Risk and Narrative in the Contemporary Novel." *American Literature* 74.4 (2002): 747-778.
- KELLAWAY, Kate. "Into the Woods." *The Observer* 19 June 2005: n. pag. 13 Jun. 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jun/19/poetry.features>>.
- KERRIDGE, Richard. "Ecological Hardy." *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Ed. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2001. 126-142.
- LAWRENCE, D.H. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Ware: Wordsworth, 2005.
- LUCAS, John. "Souls, Ghosts, Angels, and 'Things Not Human': John Burnside, Alice Oswald and Kathleen Jamie." *PN Review* 177 34.1 (2007): 27-32.
- MACFARLANE, Robert. Rev. of *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry*, by Harriet Tarlo. *The Guardian* 16 April 2011: n. pag. 14 Jun. 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/apr/16/ground-aslant-landscape-poetry-review>>.
- MARTINDALE, Kym. "She Do the River in Different Voices: Lyric Democracies in Alice Oswald's *Dart*." *Process: Landscape and Text*. Eds. Brace and Johns-Putra. 309-327.
- MARX, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. 1964. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- OSWALD, Alice. *Dart*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002.
- *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005.
- ROBERTS, Neil. *Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry*. London: Longman, 1999.
- RUSKIN, John. *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*. Vol.6. Ed E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1903-1912.

- SCHWENK, Theodor. *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air*. 1965. London: Rudolf Steiner, 1996.
- SKINNER, Jonathan. "Statement for 'New Nature Writing.'" *ecopoetics* 4-5 (2004-2005): 127-129.
- SMITH, Ali. *The Accidental*. London: Penguin, 2006.
- TARLO, Harriet. "Women and Eco-poetics: An Introduction in Context." *How2* 3.2 (2008). 4 Feb. 2011 <[http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol\\_3\\_no\\_2/ecopoetics/introstatements/tarlo\\_intro.html](http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/introstatements/tarlo_intro.html)>.
- WESTLING, Louise. "Literature, the Environment, and the Question of the Posthuman." *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*. Ed. Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. 25-48.
- WHEATLEY, David. "This Is Proteus, Whoever That Is." *The Guardian* 13 July 2002: n. pag. 13 Jun. 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/jul/13/featuresreviews.guardianreview13>>.
- WILLIAMS, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Flamingo, 1984.
- WOLFE, Cary. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010.
- WORDSWORTH, William. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*. Vol. 2. Ed. E. De Selincourt. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952.

